



Knowledge for Life.  
Knowledge for All.

August 16, 2023

Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont  
c/o The Vermont Department of Libraries  
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Dear Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont,

My name is Mary Danko and I am the Library Director for the Fletcher Free Library located in Burlington, Vermont. The Fletcher Free Library was founded in 1873 and moved into a beautiful Carnegie building built in 1904. In 1981, a new addition increased the size of the library to over 46,000 square feet and included a beautiful 3-story glass curtain wall. The library had over 240,000 visits and over 380,000 circulations in 2018. The library has a budget that is over \$2.6M, has 27 employees and is open 7 days a week.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify today on the importance of public library facilities and the pressing need for adequate funding to ensure their proper upkeep, modernization, and remodeling to meet the changing needs of their communities. As someone who has worked in various Vermont libraries throughout my career, I have witnessed firsthand the indispensable role that libraries play in our communities and the challenges they face in maintaining and improving their facilities.

### **Library Facilities as Essential Community Spaces**

Public library facilities are vital components of our communities, serving as educational, informational, and social hubs. These spaces must not only be in excellent operational condition but also accessible and inviting for the public. I would highly recommend that legislators read the book, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* by Eric Klinenberg (2018). Eric writes eloquently about the importance of libraries as a public space. I'd like to offer two quotes from the book:

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“There’s a term you don’t hear these days, one you used to hear all the time when the Carnegie branches opened: Palaces for the People. The library really is a palace. It bestows nobility on people who can’t otherwise afford a shred of it. People need to have nobility and dignity in their lives. And, you know, they need other people to recognize it in them too.”

-and-

“In a world where we spend ever more of our time staring at screens, blocking out even our most intimate and proximate human contacts, public institutions with open-door policies compel us to pay close attention to people nearby. After all, places like libraries are saturated with strangers, people whose bodies are different, whose styles are different, who make different sounds, speak different languages, give off different, sometimes noxious, smells. Spending time in public social infrastructures requires learning to deal with these differences in a civil manner.”

Another book, “How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy” by Jenny Odell

“True public spaces, the most obvious examples being parks and libraries, are places for—and thus the spatial underpinnings of—“what we will.” A public, noncommercial space demands nothing from you in order for you to enter, nor for you to stay; the most obvious difference between public space and other spaces is that you don’t have to buy anything, or pretend to want to buy something, to be there.”

The public library facility is a space of true equity in a community and provides the necessary structure for accessing all of our equitable library services.

### **A Structure for Collections & Technology**

Libraries need secure, reliable, dry and temperature controlled spaces for their collections. Books and other materials need to be stored safely. New books and materials need to be carefully stored, and historical and unique items need extra care and attention. And as was mentioned during the Working Group Testimony on Technology and its importance in delivering various library services, library facilities need to have the most up to date electrical systems and the best internet connectivity.

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## **Meeting Rooms and Programming Spaces**

Public libraries often offer meeting rooms in their facilities that serve as valuable spaces for community organizations and groups to gather. The meeting rooms also double as programming spaces, enabling libraries to provide a diverse range of programs. For instance, these rooms are essential for hosting children's story times, fostering early childhood literacy, and facilitating educational activities for elementary and middle school students. Additionally, these spaces are used for teen programming, often providing the only teen services in a community.

## **Community Support and Disaster Resilience**

Library facilities assume a crucial role in times of challenges and disasters. During extreme weather events or tragedies, public libraries, like those in Vermont, often serve as shelters or cooling centers, offering a safe haven for the community. Furthermore, as the world faces increasing environmental concerns, library facilities are designed to provide clean air and filtration systems, making them places to escape to from poor air quality due to wildfires or other environmental hazards. In disaster situations, libraries may transform into technology centers, offering internet access and essential services to community members in need.

## **Accessibility and Inclusivity**

Libraries strive to ensure that their facilities are accessible to all members of the community, including those with disabilities. This involves adjustments such as ramps, elevators, wider aisles, and accessible restrooms. These efforts reflect libraries' commitment to inclusivity and their dedication to serving every individual in the community.

## **Outdoor Spaces and Digital Access**

Library facilities extend beyond indoor spaces; libraries also aim to create welcoming outdoor environments. This approach is driven by the recognition that many community members rely on library Wi-Fi even when the physical library is closed. The importance of digital access was particularly evident during the pandemic, when library Wi-Fi remained accessible to individuals who depended on it for internet connectivity.

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## **Library Facilities and Modernization**

However, despite their critical role, library facilities often face funding challenges for maintenance, improvements, and modernization. In my experience at the Fletcher Free Library and other Vermont libraries, there has been a constant struggle to secure funds for basic maintenance and enhancements.

## **Maintenance and Wear and Tear**

Due to the heavy usage libraries experience, their buildings often endure significant wear and tear. At the Fletcher Free Library, the extensive opening hours, including evenings and weekends, reflect a commitment to equity by accommodating working parents. Yet, these extended hours contribute to accelerated deterioration of the facility. While the city has attempted to address deferred maintenance, challenges remain in fully addressing the needs of the library.

## **Capital Campaigns and State Funding**

In response to these challenges, libraries often undertake capital campaigns and seek grants to fund updates and renovations. For example, the Fletcher Free Library is currently exploring a capital campaign to modernize its interior. State funding is crucial for such endeavors, and some states have implemented successful programs to support libraries in their construction projects.

## **Massachusetts Libraries Construction Grant Program**

One standout example is the Massachusetts Libraries Construction Grant Program. This program, initiated by a state bond in 1987, allocates funds specifically for library construction projects. These grants have enabled the construction of new libraries, additions, renovations, and conversions, illustrating Massachusetts' dedication to public library facilities. You can read all about their program here: <https://mblc.state.ma.us/programs-and-support/construction/index.php>

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In conclusion, the importance of well-maintained, accessible, and modernized library facilities cannot be overstated. These spaces serve as community pillars, offering life-long educational opportunities, access to books & materials, assistance by librarians, support during challenges, and access to digital resources. Adequate funding is essential to ensuring that libraries can fulfill their multifaceted roles and continue to support the diverse needs of their communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Mary Danko  
Library Director

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